



TITLE:

<Field Reports> The Miracle of the Second Flowering: Recent Developments in Southeast Asian Studies in Europe

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CITATION:

Boomgaard, Peter. <Field Reports> The Miracle of the Second Flowering: Recent Developments in Southeast Asian Studies in Europe. 東南アジア研究 1997, 35(1): 164-169

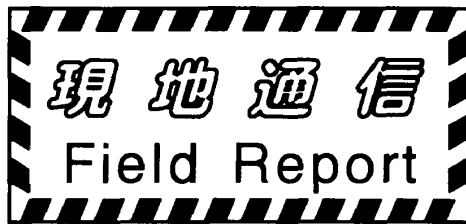
ISSUE DATE:

1997-06

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/56628>

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Introduction

Over the last decade or so the field of Southeast Asian studies in Europe has witnessed considerable change. This is partly due to developments in the various disciplines pertaining to the humanities and the social sciences that, taken together, constitute this field. As I do not pretend to have more than a passing familiarity with many of these disciplines, and have to plead utter ignorance regarding others, I will not attempt to give an overview of these developments. Therefore, this article will only describe and analyse changes in the infrastructure of Southeast Asian studies, or, in other words, in the institutions and organizations that form the framework within which these studies are being conducted.

I will argue that European scholarly interest in Southeast Asia, slowly reviving after an all-time low during the 1950s and 60s, was hit hard by severe cutbacks of university budgets in the late 1970s and 80s. However, the same cutbacks led to a concentration of research and teaching in a restricted number of centres, which forced leading scholars to formulate priorities and facilitated cooperation at national and international levels. European cooperation was further stimulated by the growing political and economic integration of Europe, and by the awareness that

The Miracle of the Second Flowering : Recent Developments in Southeast Asian Studies in Europe

By Peter BOOMGAARD*

Southeast Asian studies in Europe were running the risk of being marginalized by a growing interest in Southeast Asia elsewhere, notably in the United States and Australia. Finally, the increasing economic importance of (Southeast) Asia attracted a growing number of students and convinced political decision-makers of the need to channel more funds to Southeast Asian studies.

Background

Between 1945 and 1965, the European countries with colonies in Southeast Asia — France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands — witnessed the loss of these possessions. All of a sudden, there was no longer a demand for civil servants for these colonies, and training programmes of “colonial” studies, often with an impressive pedigree, were thereby rendered superfluous. Over the decades, these programmes had stimulated the growth of a large and complicated infrastructure of rather specialized university departments, vocational training courses, institutes, and museums. Some of these institutions taught “applied” scientific, predominantly practical skills, such as tropical agriculture. Others, however, had slowly but surely drifted away from their “applied” origins, thriving in the rarified atmosphere of ancient texts and highly specialized, esoteric museum collections, far removed from practical considerations.

After decolonization, the more practically inclined specializations could jump on the band-

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wagon of development aid, but the less “applied” disciplines were hit very hard. Not only was the — already tenuous — link with more socially relevant concerns severed when the training courses for colonial civil servants were abolished, but recruitment of students also came to a virtual standstill because frustrations with the often traumatic decolonization process had led to an all-time low in interest among the scholarly community. This development led inevitably — although not immediately — to a loss of departments, chairs, and other tenured academic positions in these “classical” fields, such as (regional and classical) languages, literature, art, archaeology, prehistory, and history.

Growth

Around 1970, however, interest in Southeast Asia was reviving. In the first place, bitter feelings aroused, both in the former colonies and in the erstwhile mother countries, by an often difficult decolonization, had by now subsided, and scholarly contacts had been reestablished. People from the former colonies came to study in the countries of the former colonizers, visiting the departments, libraries, and archives where so much know-how about their countries was stored. For instance, in 1975, a cultural agreement was concluded between Indonesia and the Netherlands that provided funding for Indonesians who wanted to study in the Netherlands. It

also financed Dutch students interested in Indonesian studies.¹⁾

In the second place, people from countries without “colonial” institutions of learning, such as Australia, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, and the US, had become more and more interested in (Southeast) Asia. As an example of this growing interest the founding of the Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies (SIAS) in 1967 can be mentioned.²⁾ Another example is that of the Modern Asia Research Centre (MARC) in Geneva, Switzerland, established in 1971. These scholars arrived in increasing numbers in the European countries with a colonial past in order to avail themselves of the accumulated knowledge of Southeast Asian societies. Scholars in the former mother countries then also returned slowly but surely to the field of Southeast Asian studies, and started to attract new students.

In the 1970s, therefore, we witnessed a revival of Southeast Asian studies throughout Europe. This growth was not restricted to the old institutions and the old colonial countries. Southeast Asia specialists were now being appointed in countries and universities where they had been absent before. This led to a desire, especially among those in isolated positions, to create more opportunities for regular contacts between specialists. Thus ECIMS was born, the European Colloquium on Indonesian and Malay Studies. Its first meetings were held in Paris (1978), London (1979), Naples (1981), and Leiden (1983). The last one was held in Berlin (1996).³⁾

Cutbacks, Concentration, and a Contemporary Focus

In the 1970s, all over Europe university budgets had been rising much faster than the national budgets of the countries concerned. Although this could be interpreted as a success for the national policies of higher education, in the sense

1) This Programme of Indonesian Studies (PrIS) was terminated in 1992, owing to a conflict between President Suharto and the Dutch minister of development cooperation. It has now been replaced by a new programme.

2) In 1988, it was renamed Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS).

3) ECIMS has a rotating secretariat, for which the institution organizing the next conference is responsible.

that ever-increasing proportions of the population were admitted to universities, it put considerable strain on the national budgets. In the late 1970s, therefore, many European governments decided to stop the disproportionate growth of university budgets. This led, in the 1980s, to repeated budget cuts, which forced the administrative bodies of most universities and related institutions to concentrate on those areas of higher learning in which they had a comparative advantage, and which, at the same time, promised to attract large numbers of students.

Until those years, universities had attempted to offer as broad a spectrum of studies as possible, which reflected the ideals of the classical university that could cater to all tastes. This had led in many European countries to a proliferation of departments or sections with just one or two Southeast Asia specialists. The budget cutbacks not only put a stop to those developments but also caused a reversal of this trend. Concentration and specialization meant that positions occupied by Southeast Asia specialists in universities where Southeast Asia was not a major topic were often no longer filled when the incumbent left.⁴⁾ This process is still going on, as many positions that are slated to

disappear are still being occupied, because labour laws in most European countries make it extremely difficult or even impossible to dismiss those who hold these positions. However, when they reach retirement age, their positions will be lost to the field of Southeast Asian studies. In the wake of these developments, valuable collections of artefacts and specialized libraries were disbanded, and with them the documentation that had made these collections accessible.

Thus, in a number of countries in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, Southeast Asian studies became increasingly concentrated in a small number of centres. In the United Kingdom, for example, most specialists are now to be found in two places, namely, in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, and at the University of Hull. In the Scandinavian countries, quite some research funding for Southeast Asian topics was channelled to one centre, namely, NIAS in Copenhagen, Denmark (see below).⁵⁾

A similar story could be told about the Netherlands, where Southeast Asian scholarship is now largely concentrated in Amsterdam and Leiden. This was not only the result of budget cuts elsewhere. It was reinforced by political decisions of the Ministry of Education and Science. The Ministry made funds available for research centres for graduate students, which led in Amsterdam to the establishment of the Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam (CASA), and in Leiden to that of the Research School for Non-Western Studies (CNWS), with a large Asia component. A few years later the Ministry decided to fund a postdoctoral research facility, in compensation for the budget cuts that had hit the (Southeast) Asian studies. This led to the founding of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), housed in Leiden, established through the joint efforts of CASA and CNWS.⁶⁾

Concentration in fewer centres could not be

4) This does not imply that institutions with large concentrations of Southeast Asia specialists did not suffer from the budget cuts. Within universities the same mechanisms sometimes operated as at the national level. Thus it could happen that within the same university one faculty with a weak Southeast Asia component could lose its few Southeast Asia positions, whereas another faculty, with a fair number of specialists, was left untouched.

5) NIAS publishes a newsletter, available free of charge (Leifsgade 33, 2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark).

6) IIAS publishes a newsletter, available free of charge (e-mail: iiasnews@rullet.leidenuniv.nl).

observed everywhere. For instance, due to decentralization policies under a former government, developments in France ran counter to this trend. In addition to Paris, where Southeast Asian studies used to be largely concentrated, in 1993 a new centre for the study of Southeast Asia has been established in Aix-en-Provence, namely, the Institute for Research on Southeast Asia (IRSEA). In the former western part of Germany, Southeast Asia scholars are to be found in many centres, such as Bielefeld, Cologne, Goettingen, Hamburg, Heidelberg, and Passau. There does not seem to be a trend towards fewer centres, probably due to the fact that the federal states of Germany are largely autonomous in their higher education policies.

However, concentration of Southeast Asian studies in a smaller number of centres than before was not the only result of the budget cutbacks. Growth-rates during the period prior to the cutbacks had not been equally high in all disciplines represented within the field of Southeast Asian studies. I think it is fair to say that the highest growth-rates obtained in the more societally oriented disciplines (economics, economic anthropology, political science, sociology), concerned with contemporary Asia, whereas the more classical, "traditional" branches either grew at a lower pace, stagnated, or even showed negative growth-rates. My impression is that these classical studies, already growing at a very moderate pace at best, were hit hardest by the budget cuts. These cuts, therefore, reinforced a shift within Southeast Asian studies that had been going on for some time.

Sometimes this shift was made visible in the mission statements of institutions with a Southeast Asia focus. Such was the case with the above-mentioned SIAS, renamed Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in 1988. Here it was decided that funding should be largely spent on

research dealing with questions of relevance for a better understanding of contemporary Southeast (and East) Asia.

European Cooperation

However hard the budget cuts may have hit the academic community, the concentration of Southeast Asian studies in a smaller number of centres in some countries did have its redeeming qualities. It made it much easier to communicate and to establish networks of scholars with similar interests. As an example ESSJN can be mentioned, short for the European Social Science Java Network. Its first meeting was held in Amsterdam in 1988, and it has organized annual workshops ever since. More recently, a network of European Vietnam specialists, Euroviet, was established, also with the purpose of holding regular scholarly meetings.

However, cooperation was not restricted to people sharing an interest in one or another Southeast Asian region or country. There were a number of circumstances that caused leading institutions in the field to aim at European cooperation for the field of Southeast Asian studies as a whole. In my opinion, the following factors have contributed to the acceleration of the cooperation process. In the first place, it was felt that a European organization was in a better position to fight further cutbacks than were the various individual institutions. Secondly, there was a growing awareness that Southeast Asian studies in Europe, in their truncated form, were running the risk of being marginalized by an increased interest in Southeast Asia elsewhere, notably in the United States and Australia, where, moreover, the field of Southeast Asian studies was better organized. Thirdly, European cooperation was stimulated by the growing political and economic integration of Europe. It was expected, or at least hoped, that this integration would lead to

a larger flow of research funds at the European level. This was, fourthly, particularly linked to the increasing economic and political importance of (Southeast) Asia, as it was expected that this would not only attract a growing number of students, but also would convince political decision-makers of the need to channel more funds to centres and individuals specialized in (Southeast) Asian studies. In the fifth place, it was felt that interdisciplinary research should be stimulated, as much as research that transcended the national Southeast Asian borders. This should counter the still existing inclination of the scholarly community to design its research along the old colonial lines, with the French studying Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the Dutch doing Indonesia, and the British having a monopoly on Malaysia and Burma.

European cooperation in the field of Southeast Asian studies as a whole — as opposed to cooperation on specific regions, as embodied in ECIMS, ESSJN, and Euroviet — found its first expression in the *European Newsletter of South-East Asian Studies* (ENSEAS). Issue No. 1 of the Newsletter was published in 1988, and it has appeared twice annually ever since. It was an initiative of a number of leading institutions in the field, who are still the main providers of data included in the ENSEAS. It was published by the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology (KITLV) in Leiden, the Netherlands, and is now a joint publication of KITLV and Euroseas (see

below).⁷⁾ The ENSEAS publishes the most recent institutional news, in addition to data on conferences, workshops, recent and forthcoming publications, dissertations, teaching programmes, research projects, and exhibitions. Each issue contains data from France, Germany, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, and frequently news is included from Poland, Portugal, Russia, and Slovakia. Eastern European countries and institutions have participated since 1991, on which more will be said presently.

The same people and institutions involved in the creation of ENSEAS were also instrumental in starting an exchange programme for students in 1990. Money came from the headquarters of the European Union in Brussels, where the Erasmus programme had been designed specifically for this purpose.

The most recent — and, one is inclined to say, logical — addition to these networks is the European Association of South-East Asian Studies, or Euroseas for short, established in 1992. Its secretariat is housed by the KITLV in Leiden, the Netherlands.⁸⁾ It can be regarded as the European counterpart of similar, much older, associations in Australia and the US.⁹⁾ Apart from the factors mentioned above that all contributed to the wish to found such an association, the fall of the Berlin Wall (late 1989) and the political developments that followed in its wake were an extra stimulus to persevere in the attempts to create one network for all European Southeast Asia scholars, including those of Eastern Europe.

Since 1990/1, communications between Western and Eastern European scholars have improved considerably. Until then, although it was known in the West that there were a number of scholars in Eastern Europe who were Southeast Asia specialists, it was very difficult to get an impression of the work that was being done

7) Kitlv@rullet.leidenuniv.nl is the e-mail address for ENSEAS. Enquiries also can be directed to ENSEAS, c/o KITLV, PO Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands.

8) Euroseas@rullet.leidenuniv.nl is the e-mail address of Euroseas.

9) Non-Europeans can become associate members of Euroseas. Apart from voting rights, they enjoy the same benefits as ordinary members.

there, both in a quantitative and in a qualitative sense. When it became easier to travel between the two parts of Europe, it transpired that the Eastern European countries, and Russia (Moscow and St. Petersburg) in particular, could boast of a vast research potential regarding Southeast Asia. However, the new developments, though boosting East-West contacts, also led to huge difficulties for the Eastern European Southeast Asia scholars, as the unfavourable economic situation of most countries concerned forced governments to reduce the number of positions in the field. Alternatively, they refused to correct wages for inflation, which makes it very difficult for scholars to make ends meet.

Euroseas has tried, from the very beginning of its existence, to include scholars from Eastern Europe, as a matter of course, in its activities, and two of its board members are Russians. It also facilitated the participation of a number of Eastern Europeans in its first conference, which was held in Leiden in 1995.

Although there is no wall or other obstacle between the more northern and the more southern countries of Western Europe, not much is known about Southeast Asian scholarship in some of the southern countries, such as Greece, Italy, and Spain. Euroseas is trying to establish contact with the scholarly communities there, and now has some members in these countries. It seems that interest in Southeast Asia, though still modest, is increasing there as well. A confer-

ence on Pre-Modern Southeast Asia is to be held in Barcelona, Spain, in March 1997.

Euroseas also succeeded in attracting a fair number of scholars from Southeast Asia itself to its 1995 conference, in fulfilment of one of its explicitly stated aims, namely, increased cooperation between European and Southeast Asian scholars.

Epilogue

The Euroseas conference of 1995 attracted 200 people. Euroseas itself has by now over 300 members (January 1997). It may be expected that both numbers will have increased when Euroseas organizes its second conference, to be held in Hamburg, Germany, in September 1998. According to the directory Euroseas is about to publish, there are over 1,000 Southeast Asia specialists in Europe, so there is still ample room for growth.

A start has been made, however, and Europeans are slowly but surely getting used to the idea that they have to cooperate in order to make themselves heard where it counts. They have survived the onslaught of the budget cuts, and some modest growth has been registered since then. If they want to prevent this second flowering from being nipped in the bud, European Southeast Asia specialists would be well advised to keep up the good work of cross-fertilization.